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SUBJECT: PRECARIOUSLY PERCHED BETWEEN CRISIS AND
RECOVERY, GHOR RESIDENTS HOPE FOR A PLENTIFUL 2009
WHEAT HARVEST

¶1. (U) Summary: Between March 21 and 28, representatives from the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) and Office of Food for Peace (USAID/FFP) visited Afghanistan's Ghor province to monitor Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and World Vision activities. The province has suffered from extreme snow and cold in recent winters and repeated droughts, resulting in the failure of 90 percent of the 2007/2008 wheat crop. In response, CRS, in partnership with Afghanaid, is implementing an emergency response program, including cash-for-work (CFW) activities and emergency vouchers. World Vision is in the initial phase of a multi-year assistance program (MYAP) to decrease food insecurity through nutrition supplementation and education, improving health practices and sustainable agricultural livelihoods. Beneficiaries reported high satisfaction with the CRS/Afghanaid cash-for-work and voucher programs, which provide a number of valuable side benefits to communities. End summary.

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GHOR RESIDENTS VULNERABLE AFTER REPEATED SHOCKS

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¶2. (U) In addition to Ghor province's chronic poverty, the vulnerability of approximately 800,000 residents of this mountainous Qforgotten provinceQ has been exacerbated by six droughts in the last seven years and extreme snow and cold during the 2007/2008 winter. Although milder than the previous year, the 2008/2009 winter produced fifteen major storms, producing snowfalls ranging from one to three meters in affected areas. Combined, these natural disasters have resulted in losses in livestock, seed stocks, and household assets. Despite generally lower inflation in Afghanistan in recent months, continued high food and

fuel prices in this remote area are compounding the effects on local residents.

¶13. (U) Implementing partners and beneficiaries report that local coping strategies during the recent drought and winter crises included increased migration to seek work opportunities in urban areas and Iran, underage marriage for girls in vulnerable households, selling of assets, and indebtedness.

¶14. (U) More recently, CRS reported that program beneficiaries almost universally requested basic food commodities, indicating that the most vulnerable households have exhausted all food stocks prior to the August/September harvest and despite food availability, cannot afford to purchase food.

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MONITORING CRSQ EMERGENCY PROGRAM

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¶15. (U) On March 22, a team comprising USAID/OFDAQs Senior Humanitarian Advisor in Afghanistan and USAID/FFPQs Afghanistan Project Management Specialist, accompanied by the Department of StateQs Ghor Provincial Reconstruction Team Representative, conducted a monitoring visit to three CRS-managed cash-for-work road rehabilitation projects in Dahan Denan and Puye villages, Chaghcharan district, representing two of the 74 villages currently receiving CRS

KABUL 00001000 002 OF 005

assistance.

¶16. (U) Since December 2008, CRS cash-for-work activities, including snow clearing and road construction or renovation, have injected more than USD 140,000 (for a total of 35,253 man-days of work) into the pockets of 1,251 crisis-affected Ghor residents. Ongoing project activities visited by the monitors include the construction of 15 km of a new road and rehabilitation of 500 meters of a transportation link in Chaghcharan district. Additionally, CRS has provided 191 extremely vulnerable households unable to participate in cash-for-work activities with vouchers for the purchase of essential household commodities, including flour, rice, sugar, and tea.

¶17. (U) Partnered with CRS, Afghanaid is implementing cash-for-work and emergency vouchers for approximately 1,000 households in 27 villages in remote Shahrak district. Due to Sharak DistrictQs remote location, USAID/OFDA and USAID/FFP visitors only spoke with Chaghcharan-based Afghanaid staff about program progress but were not able to visit project sites. CRS visits periodically.

¶18. (U) In total, CRS and Afghanaid cash-for-work activities benefited 5,370 households in 74 villages in Chaghcharan, Dulaina and Shahrak districts. CRS is registering an additional 1,300 households from eight villages in Dulaina and Chaghcharan districts in their emergency program.

PROGRAM IMPACTS

¶19. (U) The CRS-managed cash-for-work program appears very well-organized and well-run. USAID/OFDA and USAID/FFP staff reported active male participation and enthusiasm for the program, as well as appropriate monitoring. Village elders expressed satisfaction with the program, including the added benefit of road

improvement or, in the case of Puye-Rezqan, new road construction opening up thoroughfares for vehicle traffic in and out of their villages. One of the few downsides to CRSQ emergency intervention was limited female participation.

¶10. (SBU) CRS field teams, beneficiaries, and village elders shared with the monitoring team perceptions of cash-for-work (CFW) program benefits:

- a) Cash infusions increase the flow of goods and food into poorer villages, benefitting all residents.
- b) CFW provides employment and sufficient resources to survive the winter and lean season between harvests when food is scarcest. Additional benefits include decreasing the likelihood of marrying off young daughters, decreasing indebtedness, and increasing borrowing power of participants in order to buy seeds for this planting season.
- c) CFW enhances security because men and youth are gainfully employed and occupied, thereby decreasing the likelihood of involvement with illegal activities, including poppy production.
- d) The CFW is implemented by CRS and local participants, thus it by-passes Afghan Government involvement; beneficiaries receive all of the aid, avoiding the Qovernment cutQ. (Note: Villagers reported that some officials involved with

KABUL 00001000 003 OF 005

government-run programs, such as Directorate of Rural Rehabilitation and DevelopmentsQs (DRRD) food-for-work activities, diverted commodities to their own pockets. It is unclear if this is blatant corruption or whether officials felt food they took was an expected return for their involvement in the organizing the activities. VillagersQ impression of this practice, is that district officials took a QcutQ of their food and it was improper, thus corruption. Monitors were not able to verify these claims. USAID/FFP is following up on this finding with WFP and FFP in Washington, DC to take corrective action where USAID funded WFP commodities may be involved. Findings have been shared with WFP since they are directly partnered with MRRD. WFP has very recently increased staff dedicated to monitoring and evaluation for all of Afghanistan and intend to be more proactive to monitor utilization of WFP provided food commodities.) CRS and Afghanaid beneficiaries know their entitlement and trust they will receive USD180 upon completion of 45 days of work.

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WORLD VISION PROGRAMMING IN GHOR

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¶11. (U) While in Ghor, USAID/FFP and OFDA visited shura members in Dehne Sufak village where World Vision recently identified 28 potential MYAP program beneficiaries. USAID/FFP and OFDA also visited World Vision staff, Ghor provincial health officials and Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (CHA), a local NGO partner in the MYAP program. World Vision is in the process of identifying beneficiaries in 145 villages in Chaghcharan district for this FFP-supported health and livelihoods initiative MYAP. When fully implemented, the program will address food insecurity for more than 380,000 direct and indirect beneficiaries in five districts. In February 2009, a local warlord confiscated 9.8 metric tons (MT) of rice imported by World Vision for the MYAP program. (Note: In response, World Vision reported the theft to Provincial

authorities including the Deputy and Provincial Governor in Ghor, the Herat police department and regional police. Police will be advised of future food commodity shipping through their area of responsibility.) USAID suggested PRT assistance to secure the road. World Vision refused the military escort. USAID/FFP has since intervened with the World Food Program to include MYAP food within a WFP convoy. At present, critical nutritional supplementation stocks for intended beneficiaries remain in Herat as a result of the attack and insecurity on the main road. Local police lack the capacity to provide safe passage for food stocks, so World Vision is exploring transportation options, including convoying with the U.N. World Food Program (WFP) or hiring local security for the voyage to Chaghcharan, GhorQs provincial capital. Insecure passage is the main obstacle to program implementation.

DRRD ON FOOD AVAILABILITY

¶12. (U) The Directorate of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (DRRD) is WFPQs main partner for food

KABUL 00001000 004 OF 005

assistance in Ghor. (Note: In FY09, USAID/FFP contributed USD 63.1 million through 62,190 MT of food commodities towards the WFP/Afghanistan national Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (PRRO).) On March 26, USAID/FFP and OFDA visited with the DRRD Chaghcharan office director. He reported that in 2008, DRRD in Ghor received and distributed 7,357 MT of food from WFP. To date in 2009, WFP has provided 8,285 MT of food to DRRD in support of Ghor humanitarian programs. DRRD received an additional 5,100 MT from the government over the 2008/2009 winter. For the food-for-work activities, beneficiaries are selected by DRRD supervisors together with community development councils. Currently, DRRD has 500 MT, which is enough wheat to feed 1,000 households or 6,000 individuals for one month, as an emergency contingency stock. By the directorQs own admission, DRRDQs capacity for emergency assessments, beneficiary selection, food delivery, and monitoring is weak. WFP has a sizeable regional office in Herat but is largely absent in Ghor.

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OTHER COMPLEMENTARY USG ASSISTANCE IN GHOR PROVINCE

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¶13. (U) In response to last yearQs drought, USAID funded International Relief and Development for an Afghanistan Vouchers for Increased Production In Agriculture (AVIPA). The AVIPA program provided 800 metric tons of wheat seed to 16,000 drought-affected subsistence farmers. USAID/Afghanistan also supports a watershed development program through CRS in Ghor.

OVERALL TRIP FINDINGS

¶14. (U) According to village leaders in Puye, CRS assistance through the cash-for-work program, prompted some potential migrants to stay home. However, discussions highlighted that migration to urban areas or Iran is an entrenched survival strategy which is minimally impacted by temporary employment.

¶15. (U) On a positive note, during travels through rural Chaghcharan and Dulaina district villages, monitors noticed many local farmers planting for this season. According to the DRRD representative and CRS

agronomist, rains in the week following USAID/OFDA and FFP site visits are considered a new year's gift by the farmers. However, adequate rains in April and May will ultimately determine this year's harvest success.

¶16. (SBU) Many people voiced two specific frustrations during our field visit. The first issue, which appears commonly held among Ghor residents, is the sense that Kabul has broken promises to provide roads and other support. The second frustration, which more directly affects humanitarian assistance, was local beneficiaries' frustration with local government taking a cut from promised assistance when distributed by government entities. They specifically mentioned food cuts from recent food for work activities. (Note: In Ghor, the food commodities were GoIRA rather than USAID/FFP support to WFP. However, FFP has discussed these issues with DRRD in Chagcharan and raised the same concerns with WFP. In response, WFP has added an additional 32 staff to monitor and react to misappropriation of food assistance.)

KABUL 00001000 005 OF 005

¶17. (U) According to the DRRD director, the provincial disaster management commission meets on an as-needed or ad hoc basis. As such they react when a disaster occurs rather than proactively planning for crises. The director noted that provincial government partners lack capacity to perform emergency assessments. Following last year's drought, collaboration with CRS provided critical technical capacity and staff for emergency assessment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

¶18. (U) Based on observations made during the trip, the monitoring team recommends:

- USAID/OFDA and USAID/FFP should continue to monitor the situation in Ghor and other drought-affected provinces carefully, particularly approaching harvest time.
- Encourage CRS to find culturally and community-acceptable ways to include women in cash-for-work programs.
- Given that WFP has 116 staff, including six expatriates, in the Herat regional office covering Ghor, encourage regular WFP monitoring of program partners and impacts of food assistance in Ghor province.
- Discuss options and set a timeline with World Vision for secure transport of essential commodities from Herat to Ghor.

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